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Communist Objectives, Capabilities, and
Intentions in Southeast Asia

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Communist Objectives, Capabilities, and Intentions in Southeast Asia

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COMMUNIST OBJECTIVES, CAPABILITIES, AND INTEN- TIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Communist objectives, military and subver-
sive capabilities, and short-term intentions in continental
Southeast Asia.¹

CONCLUSIONS

1. The long-range Communist Bloc objectives in South-
east Asia are to eliminate US influence and presence and
to establish Communist regimes throughout the area.
Although the Communist powers have some differences of
view as to tactics and priorities and the risks to be run in
pursuing their objectives, they have thus far maintained
a basic unity of ultimate objectives and a high degree of
policy coordination with respect to Southeast Asia. If the
current differences between Moscow and Peiping continue
to grow, a major split on Southeast Asia policy could ensue.
In this event, Peiping and Hanoi, which have special in-
terests in Southeast Asia, might resort to more militant
tactics. (*Paras. 6-9*)

↓ 2. Communist China, with the largest land army in the
world, has the capability to overrun Southeast Asia and
defeat the combined indigenous armed forces of the area.
The North Vietnamese forces are superior to those of any
other mainland Southeast Asia state. We do not believe,

¹ The following estimates also bear upon the problem: SNIE 13-3-61, "Chi-
nese Communist Capabilities and Intentions in the Far East," dated 30
November 1961; SNIE 10-2-61, "Likelihood of Major Communist Military
Intervention in Mainland Southeast Asia," dated 27 June 1961.

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however, that the Communist powers intend to attempt to achieve their objectives in Southeast Asia by large-scale military aggression. We believe that they intend to continue to pursue these objectives primarily through subversion, political action, and support of "national liberation" struggles, so as to minimize the risks of Western, particularly US, military intervention. Over the past several years there has been a clear pattern of increasing Communist military, paramilitary, and political capabilities for pursuing Communist objectives in Southeast Asia. The development of these capabilities is particularly advanced in Laos and South Vietnam. (Para. 11)

3. We do not believe that Communist efforts in Southeast Asia follow a predetermined timetable or priority listing. Laos and South Vietnam are now their priority targets. We continue to believe that the Communists do not intend to initiate an all-out military effort to seize Laos. If, however, a military showdown between the Laotian Government forces and the Communists does develop, we believe that the Communist side would win out, bringing additional forces from North Vietnam if necessary. Nevertheless, the Communists are unlikely to pursue actions involving substantial risk of direct US military involvement so long as they continue to believe that they have a good chance of achieving their objectives in Laos by legal, political means. (Paras. 12, 15-16)

4. In South Vietnam, we believe that there will be no significant change over the short run in the current pattern of Viet Cong activity, although the scope and tempo of the Communist military and political campaigns will probably be increased. The Viet Cong will probably again resort to large-scale attacks, seeking to dramatize the weakness of the Diem forces and to reduce both civilian and military morale, in an effort to bring about Diem's downfall under circumstances which could be exploited to Communist advantage. (Para. 21)

5. In Thailand, the initial effort of Communist China and North Vietnam will probably be to increase their subversive potential, particularly in the northeastern frontier area.

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Concurrently, the Soviets will continue to employ a combination of political pressures, military threats, and economic inducements to persuade the Thai Government to seek accommodation with the Bloc and adopt a more neutral policy. The Communists almost certainly believe that by sapping the independence of Laos they will be advancing their interests in Thailand as well. The neutralist positions of Cambodia and Burma are acceptable to the Communists for the time being. Communist activity in both countries will, therefore, probably be kept at low key. (*Paras. 12, 24, 26, 28*)

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DISCUSSION

I. COMMUNIST OBJECTIVES

6. The Communist Bloc long-range objectives in Southeast Asia are to remove all vestiges of US influence and presence and to establish Communist regimes throughout the area. As an intermediate step, the Communists are seeking to move Laos into a strongly Communist influenced, if nominally "neutralist" position. In South Vietnam, the struggle is probably so sharply drawn that the Communists look for only a brief neutralist stage, if any, in the progression toward communism. In Thailand, the Communist effort has not yet reached major proportions, and emphasis is upon pressures at the government level to move Thailand away from its ties with the West into a neutralist position. However, there are differences of view among the Communist powers immediately concerned—the USSR, Communist China, and North Vietnam—as to tactics and priorities and the risks to be run in seeking their long-range objectives in the area. There are also differences between Moscow and Peiping over certain fundamental matters of ideology and policy.²

7. The national interests of the USSR, Communist China, and North Vietnam in Southeast Asia differ. The Soviets are not linked with the area in terms of geography, history, or economics, and they feel no threat to their national security emanating from the area. Moscow's interests in Southeast Asia appear to be mainly political and strategic, and its tactics tend to be less militant than desired by Peiping and Hanoi. Thus, the Soviets, while supporting "wars of national liberation,"

²For an analysis of the differences between the USSR and Communist China see NIE 11-5-62, "Political Developments in the USSR and the Communist World," dated 21 February 1962.

as in Laos, are more cautious than the Chinese and more concerned with the risk of local wars in the Far East spreading into general war.

8. Communist China and North Vietnam, on the other hand, have special interests in Southeast Asia derived from their geographic position, historical associations, and economic needs. Peiping considers continental Southeast Asia to be part of its sphere of influence. Hanoi regards Laos and South Vietnam as within its special purview. Both have been involved in ambitious economic development plans and would stand to gain economically from domination of Southeast Asia. In addition, they are, at present, more militantly revolutionary than the Soviets and less reluctant to risk local war in order to achieve the early establishment of Communist regimes in the area.

9. Despite these differing interests and viewpoints, the Communist powers appear to have maintained a basic unity of ultimate objectives and a high degree of policy collaboration with respect to Southeast Asia. Laos provides the only apparent exception to this generalization, but as yet the Communist powers do not appear to be seriously at cross purposes. If, however, the differences between Moscow and Peiping continue to grow, a major split on Southeast Asia policy could ensue. In this case, Peiping and Hanoi might resort to more militant tactics.

II. COMMUNIST CAPABILITIES

10. Every country in continental Southeast Asia is vulnerable in some degree to Communist subversion, political and economic pressures, and military aggression. The governments of the area all feel threatened and exposed. Most have tended to overemphasize

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the threat of military aggression by Communist China and/or Communist North Vietnam and to underemphasize the threat from internal subversion and Communist "national liberation" tactics. Whether neutralist or pro-Western in orientation, the governments of Southeast Asia gear their policies to their assessment of the balance of force between the Communist and non-Communist powers in the Far East and of the willingness of the West to intervene militarily.

11. Communist China, with the largest land army in the world, has the capability to overrun mainland Southeast Asia and defeat the combined indigenous armed forces of the area. The armed forces of Communist North Vietnam are superior to those of any other mainland Southeast Asia state. We do not believe, however, that the Communist powers intend to attempt to achieve their objectives in Southeast Asia by large-scale military aggression. We believe that they intend to continue to pursue these objectives primarily through subversion, political action, and support of "national liberation" struggles, so as to minimize the risks of Western, particularly US, military intervention. Over the past several years there has been a clear pattern of increasing Communist military, paramilitary, and political capabilities for pursuing Communist objectives in Southeast Asia. The development of these capabilities is particularly advanced in Laos and South Vietnam.³

III. COMMUNIST SHORT-TERM INTENTIONS

12. We do not believe that the Communists have developed a firm timetable for achieving their objectives in Southeast Asia, or that their efforts follow a precise priority listing. It is clear that Laos and South Vietnam are now receiving priority attention. We believe that the neutralist positions of Cambodia and

Burma are acceptable to the Communists for the time being, and that Thailand is likely to become an increasingly active arena for Communist political pressures, infiltration, and subversion.

A. Laos⁴

13. The minimum short-term Communist objectives in Laos had probably been satisfied, in general, at the time of the cease-fire in May 1961. Communist-held territory in Laos permitted the overland movement of personnel and supplies into South Vietnam by way of the secure, if difficult, maze of connecting mountain trails in Laos. Moreover, the Lao Army was disorganized, disheartened, and ineffective. Movement by Communist personnel into and across Laos was virtually unchallenged even where nominal government control remained in effect. Hence it was unnecessary for the Communists to risk the possibility of armed intervention by the US, by seeking to achieve the complete domination of Laos by military means. At the same time, developments of the past few months have probably caused the Communists to revise downward their estimate of the chances of US military intervention in Laos.

14. The delays in negotiations for establishing a coalition government in Laos, the substantial buildup of the Laotian armed forces during the cease-fire, and the pattern of limited Lao Army offensive action, particularly since mid-December 1961, probably caused considerable annoyance and some concern to the Communist Pathet Lao and to the North Vietnamese leaders who control and direct the Communist effort in Laos. These considerations probably account for the limited Communist counterattacks of recent

³ For details concerning Communist activity and strength in Laos and South Vietnam see Annex and maps.

⁴ See also SNIE 58-62, "Relative Military Capabilities of Opposing Forces in Laos," dated 11 January 1962, and SNIE 58/1-62, "Relative Military Capabilities of Opposing Forces in Laos," dated 31 January 1962.

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weeks. We do not believe that the pattern of military activity thus far indicates preparations for an offensive designed to take the major Mekong cities by assault.

15. We continue to believe that the Communist powers do not wish to become deeply involved militarily in Laos, and that to the extent possible they prefer to keep their military involvement clandestine. Thus, so long as they see a reasonable chance to achieve a political settlement which would not in practice preclude continued use of southern Laos as a base for operations against South Vietnam, the Communists are unlikely to adopt a course of action which would involve substantial risk of direct US military involvement. Moreover, the Communist side probably considers that their chances of winning control of Laos by legal, political means are good.

16. However, if the Laotian Government increases the scale of its military activity, the Communists will respond with counter military action, and a general military showdown between the two sides could ensue. Such a showdown might also develop from continued Communist military pressures designed to force the government to return to negotiations. In case of a test of military strength, we believe that the Communist side would win out, bringing additional forces from North Vietnam, if necessary.

B. South Vietnam⁵

17. The primary Communist objective in South Vietnam is its reunification with North Vietnam under Communist domination. The

⁵ See also NIE 14.3/53-61, "Prospects for North and South Vietnam," dated 15 August 1961; SNIE 10-3-61, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain SEATO Undertakings in South Vietnam," dated 10 October 1961; SNIE 53-2-61, "Bloc Support of the Communist Effort Against the Government of Vietnam," dated 5 October 1961; and SNIE 10-4-61, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain US Actions in South Vietnam," dated 7 November 1961.

tactics being used are a combination of political and guerrilla warfare which have been developed to a high degree of proficiency by the Vietnamese Communists over a long period of time. The Communists operating in South Vietnam (the Viet Cong) are directly controlled and provided with political and strategic guidance by the Communist Party of North Vietnam (the Lao Dong). The North Vietnamese regular army provides military guidance, and some cadres, technicians, and logistical support.

18. The major strengths of the Viet Cong include their superior intelligence service, the extent of their control of the countryside and the peasantry, their thorough knowledge of the local terrain, and their mobility and their ability to achieve surprise, all of which are characteristic of a well organized guerrilla force. The Viet Cong are not capable of defeating the South Vietnamese armed forces in conventional type warfare. On the other hand, the government forces are able to concentrate their efforts against a given area only by exposing other areas to Viet Cong attack.

19. The Viet Cong's progression from guerrilla to conventional warfare tactics, if it occurs, will probably vary in different areas and will depend on a number of factors, including their success achieved in lowering the South Vietnamese Army's morale, the consolidation of their control in the countryside, and their introduction of new weapons and materiel. In the meantime, they will probably continue their current campaign of concentrating upon the government's paramilitary forces and attacking regular army units only when they have sufficient numerical superiority to inflict decisive defeats. Isolated outposts, patrols, and vehicle convoys will be the principal military targets, with a concurrent major political and economic effort in the rural areas to reduce governmental authority and further disrupt the Vietnamese economy.

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Further attacks can be expected against the capitals of provinces, particularly those in areas under considerable Communist control.

20. The North Vietnamese leaders may still hope to achieve the reunification of North and South Vietnam through the medium of the countrywide elections stipulated in the 1954 Geneva Accords. North Vietnam seeks to remove President Diem and eliminate US influence in South Vietnam through military and political pressures. There is a continuing possibility that Hanoi may attempt to establish a "rival government" in South Vietnam. Statements by Radio Hanoi on the internal and external activities of its "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam," as well as the Front's recent initiation of its own broadcasting operations, suggest that Hanoi may be preparing for such a move.

21. For the short run, however, we believe that there will be no significant change in the current pattern of Viet Cong activity in South Vietnam, although the scope and tempo of the military and political campaigns will probably be increased. The Viet Cong will probably again resort to large-scale attacks, seeking to dramatize the weakness of the Diem forces and to reduce both civilian and military morale, in an effort to bring about Diem's downfall under circumstances which could be exploited to Communist advantage.

C. Thailand⁶

22. Communism has never been attractive to the Thai people. However, neutralism has certain historical roots in Thailand and considerable immediate appeal to the Thai people. The USSR has been pressing the Thai Government to disengage from SEATO, expand relations with the Soviet Union, and move toward neutrality. At the same time,

⁶ See also SNIE 52-61, "Thailand's Security Problems and Prospects," dated 13 December 1961.

the Thai leaders feel increasingly exposed to attack and infiltration from Communist China and North Vietnam as a result of developments in Laos.

23. In the northeast Thai provinces, which historically have been economically depressed, the people are ethnically close to the Laotians. The area also has a special vulnerability to Communist penetration as a result of the presence of more than 50,000 Vietnamese refugees of the Indochina War, most of whom frankly admit their allegiance to Ho Chi Minh. North Vietnamese and Lao Communists are probably maintaining liaison with cadre elements among this Vietnamese refugee community and providing them with small arms and guerrilla warfare training. Thailand's long, poorly-defended border with Laos facilitates Communist infiltration.

24. The Communists are unlikely to initiate an overt attack against Thailand in the foreseeable future. The Asian Communist states probably believe that their base of subversive activities in Thailand must be substantially strengthened before a major guerrilla-supported national liberation movement could be attempted. At present, no widespread indigenous Communist movement exists in Thailand, and the small, illegal Thai and Chinese Communist parties are relatively ineffective. Communist Chinese and North Vietnamese tactics, therefore, probably will be employed initially to increase the subversive potential in Thailand, particularly in the northeastern frontier area. Concurrently, the USSR will continue to employ a combination of political pressures, military threats, and economic inducements to persuade the Thai Government to seek accommodation with the Bloc and adopt a more neutral policy. The Communists almost certainly believe that by sapping the independence of Laos they will be advancing their interests in Thailand as well.

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D. Burma

25. The objectives of the USSR and Communist China in Burma appear to be directed toward achieving gradual control over that country under the guise of friendly cooperation. Communist China has made considerable progress during the last year in exploiting the good will created by the Sino-Burmese border settlement and generally has increased its influence among key Burmese political and military leaders. Burmese military leaders during 1960-1961 accepted Chinese Communist offers of troop assistance in operations against the anti-Communist Chinese irregulars based in Burma, and additional Chinese military assistance may be utilized against other dissident groups along the Sino-Burmese border.

26. In view of the foregoing successes, the Chinese Communists probably see little necessity for projecting a takeover of Burma by force or even by fostering a pro-Communist revolutionary movement among indigenous Communist political and insurgent groups.

E. Cambodia

27. Communist tactics in Cambodia generally have de-emphasized any appearance of force or intimidation. Cambodia's Chinese

and Vietnamese minorities, each numbering about 300,000, are targets for Communist Chinese and North Vietnamese subversive efforts and are a potential insurgent factor. The expanding student and teacher groups in Cambodia have shown considerable susceptibility to Communist propaganda and appear to be special Communist targets.

28. However, the Communists will probably continue to display friendship and generosity toward Cambodia, and especially toward Prince Sihanouk, to demonstrate the advantages of "peaceful coexistence" and continue to take advantage of Cambodia's friendly neutrality to increase their influence in Cambodia by peaceful means. Communist China continues to lead the Communist Bloc countries in overtures to Cambodia; the Soviet Union has played a relatively minor role. Cambodia's Communist front party, known as the Pracheachon Group, wields little overt influence. It numbers about 1,000 active members and possibly as many as 30,000 sympathizers. It is tolerated by Prince Sihanouk, probably as a gesture of neutrality, but its activities are stringently curtailed. There has been contact between the Communist embassies in Cambodia and the Pracheachon, but no evidence of Communist control.

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ANNEX

A. Laos

1. The combat effectiveness of the Pathet Lao and other antigovernment forces is considerably lower than that of the North Vietnamese units. The combat capability of the North Vietnam troops is high. Many of them are regulars and combat-proven veterans who participated in the decisive defeat of the French forces in the Indochina War. The use of North Vietnamese cadres and technicians, and more recently units, in critical tactical situations has been an important factor in the success of Communist military operations in Laos.

2. Antigovernment military forces in Laos are now estimated to total about 38,000, comprised of about 6,000 Kong Le, 4,000 Kham Ouane, 19,000 Pathet Lao, and 9,000 North Vietnamese regular armed forces (the latter includes a minimum of 10 understrength infantry battalions and support troops of engineer, artillery, antiaircraft artillery, and armor).

3. Although outnumbered by the Lao armed forces, the antigovernment forces now in Laos have a superiority in artillery and armor. They are generally capable of maintaining their main forward positions and of conducting local operations to counter aggressive actions by the government forces. Without further external reinforcements, they could, by concentrating their forces, seize and hold certain key positions now held by government troops. If reinforced by additional combat units from North Vietnam, they could quickly overrun the remainder of Laos.

B. South Vietnam

4. The territory currently controlled by the Viet Cong gives them access to at least 25 percent of the 2 million militarily fit males between the ages of 15 and 49. There are now estimated to be on full-time antigovernment operations at least 25,000 Viet Cong organized into 22 battalions, 109 separate companies, and 210 separate platoons, of varying strengths. Supporting these forces are an estimated 100,000 part-time, partially armed, trained local militia who serve as village self-defense forces. Some of these are as well armed and trained as the full-time forces. In addition to providing replacements for the full-time regular units, the militia perform other support functions, such as collecting intelligence, providing guides for operational units, and supply services.

5. The Viet Cong receive coordinated directions from high level political and military headquarters in North Vietnam and operate from political bases in South Vietnam under their control. They have divided South Vietnam into two operational regions. Each region is further divided into interprovincial commands, provincial commands, districts, and villages. Each command has troop units available to it, generally on the basis of battalions in the region and interprovincial commands, and companies in the provinces.

6. The Viet Cong are equipped with an assortment of US, French, and locally-produced weapons. Generally, the "regular" units are armed with US weapons up to and including medium mortars. The principal source of these weapons in the past has been the South Vietnamese military and paramili-

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tary units, but reports indicate that additional weapons are being infiltrated to the Viet Cong from North Vietnam. North Vietnam undoubtedly has a considerable stockpile of US weapons captured from the French during the Indochina War and, more recently, from the government forces in Laos.

7. Several divisions of the North Vietnamese Army (PAVN) located in the southern portion of North Vietnam have been linked with the support and training of Viet Cong personnel. These divisions are organized from former South Vietnamese who fought against the French and withdrew to North Vietnam in 1954-1955. These approximately 50,000 combat-experienced personnel form a ready pool of trained PAVN soldiers, and they generally provide the commanders, cadres, technicians, and specialists for the Viet Cong forces. If needed, personnel from

these divisions could be made available for guerrilla operations in South Vietnam.

8. The number of PAVN personnel with the Viet Cong in South Vietnam is believed to be at least 800. These officers and NCO's serve as cadres for the various Viet Cong battalions and companies. In addition, they probably also act as instructors or technicians to operate communications systems and the more complex equipment in the Viet Cong arsenal.

9. The Viet Cong utilize both land and sea routes to infiltrate cadres and limited supplies into South Vietnam. The sea route is used primarily to transport couriers and technical equipment while the longer and more difficult overland route is used for personnel and other supplies.

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